

BYLINE: Steve Israel and Timothy V. Johnson

As we close the highly contentious 108th Congress and enter the 109th Congress, our colleagues on both sides of the aisle need to think about serving the American people with a higher level of civility.

At the November opening of his presidential library, former president Bill Clinton asked, "Am I the only person in the entire United States of America who likes both George W. Bush and John Kerry?"

The answer is no, but you might not have guessed it from the vitriol spewing from both parties in the election season. Since then, though, positive signs have emerged:

* The opening of the Clinton Presidential Center in Little Rock saw two Republican presidents join two Democratic presidents in calling for a more unified, bipartisan effort in advancing our country.

* President Bush recently indicated a desire to reach out to all members of Congress, even those who opposed him.

* Former presidents George H.W. Bush and Clinton have united to help victims of the Asian tsunamis in one of the biggest aid efforts in history.

We should take these examples as an opportunity to move forward to a more civil public discourse.

Early name-calling

Without doubt, the country has a long history of partisan mudslinging. Political rivals accused Thomas Jefferson of being an atheist, John Adams of being a monarchist, and Andrew Jackson's mother of being a prostitute.

Recent politically active groups such as the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and MoveOn.org seem tame by comparison. Yet precedence doesn't make the present-day mudslinging any less problematic.

For one, the practice has led good people, such as former senator John Breaux of Louisiana, to leave the world of politics for more civil occupations in private life, and it has kept many more people from running for office in the first place.

Elected office is too important to be left only to those who are willing to put up with personal attacks. Even more, attack politics trivializes and distracts us from the more important differences in ideas that we should be discussing.

For example, one of us receives the support of the National Rifle Association and the other does not. But to characterize each other as either a gun-toting militiaman or a gun-grabbing fascist belittles the legitimate disagreements we have over guns, leaving little room for common-sense compromises.

Move toward civility

To get beyond childish bickering and address fundamental issues, we are organizing a Congressional Civility Caucus. Our goal is to create a bipartisan group of House members that will strive for civil debate in all of our work in Washington.

The House has tried this before. In 1997, a civility retreat for about 200 House members was organized by Reps. Ray LaHood, a Republican from Illinois, and David Skaggs, a Democrat from Colorado. Members met in Hershey, Pa., in March of that year and again in 1999, but attendance dwindled. Soon thereafter, it disbanded because of a lack of interest.

Civility in Congress means more than simply calling each other "the distinguished representative" or singing Kumbaya and holding hands. Our caucus will have teeth. We will not hesitate to take a stand when the tone in Washington becomes uncivil.

Though we will continue to disagree on issues, as members of the Civility Caucus, we will respect each others' points of view in those disagreements, compromise where we are able and work to pass common-sense legislation where we find common ground.

We hope this caucus will change the current dynamics in the House by injecting a voice that rises above partisanship when politics becomes more about personal attacks than about serving our constituents. Our differences do matter. But philosophical differences need not become personal destruction.

Civility in politics shouldn't be restricted to occasional ceremonies where presidents stand together on stage. It needs to include members of Congress on opposite sides of the aisle working together every day and respecting each others' differing views.

We've got more important things to do than sling mud. After all, we have a country to run.

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